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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000206

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SUBJECT: FIJI'S ELECTION: ALL IS CALM AS COUNTING BEGINS

REF: SUVA 202 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Voting has ended in Fiji's national election, and all remains peaceful as counting begins today, May 15. Some of the smaller constituencies with a dominant favorite will know results today. A number of swing constituencies are not likely to have a first-ballot victor and will require counting of preferences. Those results could take several days. Election turnout, though mandatory, was light. Both Prime Minister Qarase and Opposition Leader Chaudhry are claiming victory, but the reality is that nobody really knows. Newspaper editorials are urging the public to accept the result, no matter who wins. Historically, the people of Fiji have done just that, initially. Per past reporting, instability is possible under either a Qarase or Chaudhry scenario, but it would likely take a while to form, would not be directed at Americans or other Westerners, and, if history is a guide, would be short-lived. Police and military are consulting on contingencies. Military Commander Bainimarama seems confident of a Chaudhry victory. He has travel plans abroad for the next two weeks. Media reports of Australian contingency planning for an evacuation have caught people's attention; but few in Fiji can imagine such a need. End Summary.

A calm atmosphere and a light turnout

¶2. (U) Voting in Fiji took place at over 1000 polling places across seven days. The scenes were peaceful everywhere. Embassy Suva observed dozens of polling places on three of the main islands. Media generally had good access to polling sites, and we received prominent media coverage of our effort. The EU, Commonwealth, Pacific Forum, and USP all had observers as well. The EU, in particular, has been doing a thorough job of watching the numbers and procedures. Police were visibly present, but there was no sense of tension. RFMF troops, while not visible, were presumably keeping an eye on things as well. RFMF Commander Bainimarama was silent all week.

¶3. (SBU) Turnout was light, especially considering that voting is mandatory under the Constitution. One explanation is that the Commissioner of Elections informed the public before voting commenced that no fines would be imposed this year. Other possible explanations are that some voters didn't like the main choices (Qarase and Chaudhry) and that some ethnic Indians have given up on voting after the Indian-oriented winners in 1987 and 1999 later were removed by coups. The Elections Office reports provisionally that 299,000 voters went to the polls out of 496,000 registered, about 60%. The elections website says about 79% voted in

¶2001. The eventual totals broken down by constituencies will provide an indication of which populations did and did not vote in large numbers. Rural ethnic-Fijians apparently turned out, but most of the seats they voted for would be SDL wins in any case.

Mis-registration a worry

¶4. (C) The biggest problems with voting were hundreds, maybe even a few thousands, of people, mostly ethnic Indians, who had proof they registered but who were not listed on the rolls at all or were listed in the wrong constituencies. Whether or not such "errors" affect the count will depend on how close some races are. Interestingly, the constituencies in which the largest discrepancies appear to have occurred are where the two ethnic-Indian parties, the FLP and NFP, compete the fiercest.

Who won? Results may take a few days

¶5. (SBU) We presume the keys to victory will be about 9 open seats, 7 of them in the Suva-Nausori corridor. Results for most of those seats, which very likely will require the complicated counting of preferences, will not be known until Tuesday at the earliest. Counting commenced this morning (Monday) at 8 a.m. in four counting centers: Lautoka, Labasa, and 2 in Suva. As was true for the voting, the counting is a plodding, detail-oriented process in Fiji. Party, international, and media observers are watching every step. As of COB, verification of ballot numbers had taken all day for many constituencies, with a first count of actual votes just commencing. Police are charged to maintain 24-hour oversight of ballot boxes. In past elections, there were claims of stuffed or exchanged ballot boxes. Chaudhry has

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alleged many extra ballot papers were printed this year, presumably for ballot-stuffing purposes. Ongoing Police investigations to date have not supported the allegation.

¶6. (U) Qarase has predicted the SDL will win 42 seats. Chaudhry has predicted the FLP will win more than the 36 required to form a government. Nobody really knows. We observed that quite a few young ethnic-Fijians appeared at FLP voter sheds. Certainly the FLP and SDL sheds had the most traffic country-wide. However, veteran pols say attendance at party sheds is not a good prediction for actual voting patterns. "People will accept your ride to the polls and will drink your kava, but then may vote for someone else."

Calls to accept results, no matter who wins

¶7. (C) All three national newspapers had editorials over the weekend urging the population to accept the result of the polls, no matter which party wins government. Historically, Fiji citizens have accepted the results with initial calm, even in 1987 and 1999. If Chaudhry's FLP wins, the demeanor of ethnic-Fijian nationalists will be tested yet again. We do not expect an immediate, strong reaction in the streets this time either, though we will certainly remain watchful. If Qarase's SDL wins, the RFMF will be the wild card. Commodore Bainimarama has suggested that he would await formation of the new Qarase government and gauge the new government's policies before deciding whether to intervene. Qarase has indicated publicly that he intends to "sort out" RFMF insubordination if he returns to power. If "sorting out" threatens Bainimarama, a coup attempt could quickly result. Thus, either an SDL or FLP scenario could bring a degree of instability at some point, though there is absolutely no indication that such instability would be aimed at American or other Western interests.

If instability occurs, Fiji aims to handle it

¶8. (C) If instability does occur, we expect it would be short-lived, with Fiji authorities in the "Fijian way"

working things out without foreign intervention. Police Commissioner Hughes and Commodore Bainimarama are consulting about contingency plans for any disturbances. Bainimarama reportedly plans to visit the Solomon Islands this week and may visit Honolulu next week, indicators that he does not expect immediate difficulties. We are told he is very confident that Qarase's SDL will meet defeat at the polls. A Sydney Morning Herald article suggesting Australian contingency planning for an evacuation exercise in Fiji has caught some media attention here. Bainimarama has refused comment, for now. Few people in Fiji can imagine a circumstance under which such an evacuation would be necessary. While Fiji has had its unfortunate history of coups with a short spurt of street violence in 2000, it has never descended into true chaos.

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